

TEENA BROWN PULU & RICHARD PAMATATAU

Big bananas in Kiribati



Photograph Credit: Richard Pamatatau

On Friday October 9th, Prince Albert II who headed his own charity for environmental projects, the Monaco Foundation, landed on Tarawa, a low-lying atoll in the Micronesian sub-region of the Pacific Ocean. His charitable foundation had sponsored a three-day climate dialogue hosted by the Kiribati government.

“As well as Prince Albert, the meeting will also be attended by representatives from 17 United Nations agencies, the

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European Union, and Canada,” crowed Radio New Zealand. Big bananas in Kiribati for a three-day stint.

Labelled a high level meeting on climate induced migration, Kiribati President Anote Tong convened a cluster of countries – the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and the Maldives – to discuss the prospect of forced migration for their populations. Radio New Zealand broadcaster, Jamie Tahana, was wrong to assume the gathering in Tarawa “aims to consider a topic that is not being openly addressed around the world.”

Historical truth was closer to Pacific geographer, John Campbell’s analysis. In his 2010 essay, *Climate Change and Population Movement in Pacific Island Countries*, Campbell noted it wasn’t that the Pacific Islands sidestepped hard talk on forced migration. Rather, it “is not such a common experience in the Pacific region.” And if it’s not an occurrence that routinely happens, then understandably it may be a complex situation to make sense of, and come up with a comprehensive way forward.

However, migration, at certain thresholds of climate change, may be seen as forced migration, and that is not such a common experience in the Pacific region. Moreover, there is precious little experience of communities being forced to permanently abandon their homelands.

A Radio New Zealand interview with Don Wiseman saw Kiribati foreign affairs secretary, Akka Rimon, describe her country’s awkward predicament in relation to the 21st conference of parties for the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change*. Held from November 30th to December 11th in Paris, she believed “the rest of the Pacific is really counting on a decision” in terms of a legally binding agreement on carbon emissions.

Was Kiribati putting all their eggs in the Paris basket too? Rimon thought the Paris accord did not symbolise the same hope for Kiribati that other Pacific Islands' states held to "because it's already too late for us to adapt to the [environmental] changes" that have happened on our atolls. The bleak reality for Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and the Maldives was that they anticipated the end was nigh.

It was like planning a colossal funeral. The Kiribati government foreknew there would come a time in the not too distant future when the majority, if not the entire population of 102,351 people, would have to be resettled beyond national borders in countries elsewhere.

"Migration with dignity" was the catch-phrase Rimon spoke of. Refusing to wear the label climate refugees, Kiribati nationals desired outward migration to countries that not only wanted them, but valued the skills, knowledge, and cultural identity they had to offer new places of residence.

The rest of the Pacific is really counting on a decision, whether that is achieved or not, it's really not going to have much difference to us, or have any impact on us because it's already too late – it's already too late for us to adapt to the changes. We can't reverse the situation that is happening. Yes, we do want some sort of agreement to come out. We want the Paris 21 to be concluded, the agreement on climate change to be concluded. And in terms of migration with dignity, and what we're trying to discuss now with leaders and partners, we also would like to see that step forward, or some action is progressed on this so we can address some of the questions we're now asking about ourselves, and our future.

As far as regional approximations on the numbers looking to permanently shift from homelands, and surveying the

places within and beyond homeland states marked for migration and resettlement, it came down to conjecture, estimation, and scenario-building. How could a country project the exact date their low-lying atolls would no longer be inhabitable?

Thus, climate induced migration was split into two bureaucratic resolutions. In due course, the world parliament at the United Nations would eventually have to decide on answers.

One possibility was for Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and the Maldives to lobby for an international process integrated into the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change*, in which member states were allocated quotas of climate induced migrants. An alternative to this, was the cluster of countries and its allies could petition the United Nations General Assembly to establish an international treaty, a legal agreement, safeguarding the rights of climate induced migrants.

The talkfest held in Kiribati was not confined to considering what action to take at the United Nations. Akka Rimon explained that for Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and the Maldives, it was about getting together “to do something for ourselves,” and asking international “human agencies” how they might assist them.

We don't like being associated as refugees. I don't know how that is being addressed, but of course, this is one of the challenges that we will face in the future, and how that is addressed is the bigger question that today, we don't even have the answer to. But, in terms of the [climate induced migration] event, it's really how we do something for ourselves. Kiribas and other countries like Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, are getting together and saying look, it's taking [a] long [time] to wait for multilateral negotiations. So, what do we do to help ourselves? This is one of them – getting

together, getting the help of human agencies – for them to say this is what’s possible, this is how we can help, and this is how you can help yourselves.

The query sparked by the anxiety of how to resolve climate induced migration, as an international crisis, was this. How do Smaller Island States party to the Pacific Islands Forum help themselves, when the answers sought were tied to decision-making procedures of the United Nations’ climate apparatus?